

## **Mission in Daumitza**

by James Lynn Smith

Light filtering through his closed eyelids meant it was morning. Jon buried his face in the pillow and relished a bit more snoozing before turning onto his back. *Is it Saturday or a work day?* He was not anxious to report to Lankin Security, but needed the money.

Opening his eyes, the white ceiling looked different. He blinked several times and sat up. The bedspread was different also. Looking around, the whole room appeared unfamiliar. *Who did I meet at what bar, and where am I?* There was no one else in the bed. Jon slapped his feet on the floor and walked to a window, pushing back the curtain.

When he looked out, his sanity went into freefall.

Outside, broad, sleek vehicles teemed through the air without attached propellers or jets, as though moving on invisible roads. They stopped and started at unseen intersections and moved onto buildings beyond with unfamiliar design.

*Anti-gravity levitation? Where the hell is this?* Too stymied to guess, he staggered back and collapsed in what he thought was an ordinary chair.

An automatic voice came from the chair, speaking in an unknown language.

“What?” he said. “Who’s there?”

“Please excuse momentary linguistic calibration,” the chair said. “Would the guest prefer electronic or acoustical stimulation for your pleasure?”

Jon bolted from the chair. “No way, I’ll stand.” He began pacing, trying to calm himself enough to remember. *I had signed up for travel to New Zealand and was sitting in a waiting room, drinking coffee.* “Damn, I’ve got to get out and find

out what's going on." His attention fell upon on a door. But upon going through, it lead into what appeared to be a bathroom. When he looked in the mirror over the lavatory, shock slammed his psyche like a hammer.

It was not his face.

Not his nose, not his ears. Lines about cheeks and eyes were different, in some ways making the face look older. Though the eyes were the same hazel hue, the brown hair was slightly lower on his forehead. "God, what's happening," Jon shouted, hoping someone would come with a cure this madness.

Some bathroom components were strange, suggesting that, even if he knew how to leave his present quarters, he would not know how to move about safely in this strange place. He thought back. *I'm Jon Greensburg, single, retired early from Army Special Ops, then hired by Lankin Security, employed five years, off-duty for vacation—on Earth, for God's sake.*

The vessels he glimpsed outside appeared to carry humans, forcing him to question where Earth-like people could have existed long enough to have such technology. Aloud he asked whoever might be monitoring, "Where is this and what's happened to me?" There was no answer.

Time passed and his fretting eventually led to searching for clues through every compartment and drawer within sight.

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A sudden tone surprised Jon. Then a portion of wall slid sideways into a deep inner slot, and two men dressed in gray tunics walked through. One carried a tray, the other an electronic pad. The man with the tray asked, "Sir, would you care to dine? I'll place this on the dinette." He waved his hand over a sensor on the wall and a table folded down as chairs rose from the floor. Placing the tray down, the man exited the room.

The other man spoke with an unfamiliar accent. "My name is Gorot. I'm

sure you have questions.”

“The granddaddy of understatement. First, who changed my face?”

“Later on that. More importantly, you have been selected as an agent for an important security firm in Daumitza.”

“Daumitza?”

“The major urbanplex of Planet Ludon. It’s not in Earth’s solar system. Your means of transport here was facilitated by the technical wizardry of the Ledanians.”

“The who?”

“The ancient ancestors of us all. People have been selected from Earth prior to your oldest history to seed civilizations beyond your sun’s influence. But let’s not get into that now. I’ll leave viewing discs for the wall screen so you can learn what we need you to know.”

“What if I don’t want to be here?”

The speaker’s demeanor turned cold. “You have no choice. Try to escape and exist even a day in this environment. You’d accidentally cross a tractor beam, get yourself electrocuted, or slammed by an aerocab. With no means to purchase anything or understand how to speak Daumitzan, travel is beyond you. If anyone paid attention to you, it would be the federal patrol, who track and identify all citizens by chips inserted in their bodies at birth. You would be an outlander, with no legal existence.”

Jon felt his face growing hot and barely suppressed the desire to pummel the man. “So what is it you want me to do?”

“Your military background indicates superior skills at assassination.”

“Overstatement. I was in Special Ops. I killed only to protect my country. After that I was a security agent for civilian organizations, not a killer.” His eyes moved to the door. “I want out.”

“Impossible. You are entirely dependent on us for your survival here.”

Jon’s inner thoughts rushed in circles. He remembered feeling helpless during his little sister’s suffering, the cries a fatal illness squeezed from her frail body, the despair that drove him into the military. *A way to protect and defend something...or maybe a death wish.* Gripping his fists, he said, “Manipulating bastards. Who are you telling me to kill?”

The man produced an image on his pad. “This is Polope Octon. She’s what you would call the CEO of our client’s adversary.”

Jon saw a tall, svelte, blonde in a dark dress standing beside a lectern, extending her hand toward some visiting VIP. He faced the man. “I’m not doing it.”

“I think you will. I failed to mention our contacts on Earth abducted your elderly parents for assurance. Your incentive, if you succeed, is that we will release your parents and frozen assets on Earth. Then we’ll return you there, even surgically reverse the modifications we made on your face, if you desire.

“That’s the carrot you’re dangling?”

“I’m afraid that metaphor is unfamiliar. Suffice it to say, that for now, your life belongs to us. Become inured to that fact.” The man turned and walked from the room. The door slid from within the wall slot and closed.

Jon stared after the man. Apparently he was shanghaied by a fake travel company back on Earth using drugs and mysterious transportation. With no reliable assurance, he could only *hope* for a return to Earth after his “mission.”

Killing—it brought back feelings he had in the Army Special Forces after assignments. He had partly evaded emotional trauma by seeing it as necessary and believing he could be a combat machine, impervious to feelings. After leaving the Army, however, suppressed emotions came back in spades, and it took years to work through them. A feeling of nausea almost overcame him.

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Weeks passed and Jon learned lessons from content the discs fed to the wall screen. Information that would make him truly free, however, was not included. He reluctantly accepted that his survival depended upon killing, unless he could figure out an alternative. When in the Army, he personalized his rationale for combat by seeing it as defense of elders, women and children subjected to the an enemy's cruelty.

Here a different motive was needed: Maybe the CEO's company was exploitative and devious, deserving of extreme action against them. Perhaps Polope Octon was a cruel, manipulative witch. This rationale was not a deep, convincing salve for his conscience, but what choice did he have? He had to get back to Earth and see his parents released from captivity.

Jon asked himself why Gorot's company didn't use one of their own as assassin. Then he recalled the identification chips anyone on this world would have inside—except him. Why the plastic surgery? Maybe anonymity. *Also to psychologically separate me from prior identity.*

Baldermitz Security was the company to which Jon was now bound, and their client's adversary was Ramshone Productions, a successful media concern. Through his suite's mail slot he received a disc with instructions telling him exactly how to leave, access special express travel, and report to Ramshone's personnel department. Graphic illustrations and a detailed description of the job were included. A fabricated identity and history was provided for his cover. He was now Jonas Rester.

The next day, a Baldermitz technician came and inserted a tiny, fake identity chip into Jon's scalp under his densest region of hair. "Although legal chips are planted deep in the abdomen at birth, ours are sufficient to fool gross body scans." Then he provided a small device for erasure. "Move this over your head and press

the button when you need to escape. It deactivates our chip.”

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After the dizzying aerocab ride to Ramshone, Jon reported to the personnel department and found it to be a booth in which he was to be interviewed by an automaton. He selected to proceed in English. Apparently, the abducted ancestors of Daumitza citizens included English speaking people from Earth. When finished he was directed to a small room where an actual person met him.

She walked in and smiled. “Hello, Jonas, I am Rita Robertsen. Though I’m Daumitzan, my name derives from Earth, as does yours. I see you speak English. Why don’t we have the interview in that language?” She was of medium height and carried herself with poise.

Jon stood and nearly gasped. *She’s drop-dead gorgeous.* As he looked at the gentle waves of her mid-length auburn hair, the sculptured nose, full lips, and clear skin, he felt as if his chest were melting.

“Let’s have a seat. I coordinate personnel records for the company, and a direct meeting is required. But I don’t mind; talking to people is nice, rather than only seeing them as numbers and time-location entries.”

The questions she asked were cordial, and his rehearsed answers sufficient. Then she announced that his employment was acceptable, and he could begin immediately. She led him to a room with three-dimensional screens, banks of buttons and displays with incoming information from various departments. His job was simple, to see that directions for media assembly and the final program packs matched. Rita showed him how to use a translator to convert written Daumitzan to English and back. Her disarming smile made him forget his grave purpose for being there. He watched her walk away, almost feeling that his soulmate was leaving.

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Jon performed his duties proficiently as he covertly studied information he brought for the floor layouts in the Ramshone building. The level with a conference room for VIP meetings was directly above him. There was a niche in the strongly supported drop-ceiling area where he could displace a panel enough to gain visual access to the podium. He needed to find a way to access the area, verify the appearance of the CEO, and find the times when the top execs met.

Jon also devised an escape plan: estimating the reaction time of the attendees, the time for security response, identifying cameras to neutralize or evade, and choosing an exit path. With a scenario in mind, a crucial question remained: how would he know his selected target was actually the CEO? The picture he had was clear, but identification errors happen and confirmation was needed.

Rita had numerous duties which kept her passing by Jon's room. He braved asking her to join him for a cup of brew at the "recess bar" and, surprisingly, she agreed.

"I appreciate your willingness to have refreshment with a new-hire peon," he said."

"That's ridiculous, your status with this company has nothing to do with your worth. Drop the ingratiating language. Do you have questions?"

"I was wondering what the CEO truly looks like. Have you ever seen her?"

"Oh yes, on occasions. She's slim, tall, and has blonde hair. By the way, her correct title here is Lead Executive Administrator, LEA; CEO is an archaic title."

"I see," he said. "What is she like?"

"I would say efficient, to-the-point. The epitome of corporate aloofness. But that's expected. To know her individually may reveal surprises."

"How so?" he asked.

"You ask a lot of questions, Jonas. Tell me about *your* history. Were you

born in Daumitza? Our records only indicate residence over the last two decades.”

How much could he say? He wanted to reveal his very heart to this woman, but what of the consequences? Unable to hide his earthlike quirks, maybe he should establish a cover that didn't contradict his fake records. He made up a story of growing up as the son of a special-case immigrant from Earth. "...and since we lived in a remote area outside Daumitza, I guess I'm not exactly urbane. That's about it." Her face told him she was not satisfied with his answer.

"I guess you'll tell me the *whole* story someday," she said.

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Several days later, when he exited the aerocab and reentered his quarters, his mail slot contained a package. He opened it and saw a hand weapon of some sort. *My instrument of ill fortune. A ray gun?* Reading the instructions, he was not far from correct. A special laser inside projected a beam to ionize air so an electrical charge could deliver a lightning-like bolt to the target. A low-charge setting enabled practice.

Rita's face popped into his mind. Her melodious voice with that hint of excitement nurtured a mood at extreme contrast to his mission. What would she think if she knew? He looked out the window. *Stop those thoughts. I have no future with her.*

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Getting Jon's weapon into Ramshone involved piecemeal, bogus deliveries to his workroom from legitimate-sounding media supply companies. There, he reassembled the parts. He explored the floor above, which had the VIP conference room, by making detours when delivering quality assessment reports. In the afternoons, traffic in the hallways was lowest. Some rooms with access to utility and maintenance devices were unlocked, and he found one where he was able to crawl into the ceiling, move over the VIP conference room, and establish his

assassin's niche. The heavy framework for ceiling panels was sturdy and only needed padding to dampen sounds of his movement. One afternoon, he sneaked in a mount that gave his weapon a more controllable aimpoint.

Rita made most of her trips to various departments during the mornings and, despite his earlier resolve, Jon made sure he could at least greet her from time to time. One morning, she had a little girl with her.

“Good morning,” he said. “Who’s this?”

“Ultina, this is Mr. Rester,” Rita said, waiting patiently until the girl looked up. “He helps the company make some of the programs you watch at home.”

The little one flashed a broad smile and greeted him in a language he didn’t understand.

“She speaks Daumitzan, Jonas. Recently started English and a number of other languages.”

“She’s pretty, like her...”

“Mother, thank you. Yes I’m her mother. I birthed her with help from the Natal Genetics Bureau, a sperm bank. I carried her to full term, old-fashioned style. Some thought I was crazy when artificial wombs are available, but I felt the natural way would create a greater bond.”

The girl resembled Jon’s sister, not much older when illness sucked the life from her. He knew about human bonds—and the pain when they are shattered. Restrained tears ached behind his eyes.

Rita looked at him, surprised, then sympathetic, as though fathoming volumes without spoken words. At length she said, “Ultina and other children are here this morning to see where their parents or guardians work. The LEA made this possible. Public relations, I guess.” Rita turned to Ultina. “Okay, dear, let’s walk on now.”

“Good to see you both.” Jon moved on with a storm in his head. How could

he manage the conflict in his soul? *Better to avoid further contact.*

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Three days later, the Ramshone schedule of events came to Jon's workroom. One event was for an executive meeting in the conference room with Polope Octon, LEA, presiding. He marked the date and rehearsed his plan.

On the morning of the meeting, Jon arrived at work early, despite not having slept well. He deactivated the fake identity chip in his scalp and managed to maneuver undetected past hall monitors which did a slow, back and forth scan, but one was a wide-field imaging device. For that, Baldermitz had supplied him with a wireless device that hacks into its signal with the image of an empty hallway. Entering the room with access to the drop-ceiling area over the conference room, he climbed up and maneuvered to his niche. He made a final adjustment on equipment he'd previously placed there. A slight displacement of the marked panel confirmed the podium was in clear view of his weapon sites.

Jon stiffened as he heard the door to the conference room open. People filtered in with conversation and laughter. A hush came over the room when someone called for order. The tall, slender form of Polope Octon stepped to the dais and approached the podium. *The dark dress? Business attire, an impression of authority.*

She smiled briefly, assumed a sober expression, and spoke. Jon could only guess at the words, since they were Daumitzan.

Peering through the weapon telescope, he shut off the laser-aiming aid and tweaked the crosshairs exactly on Polope's head. Only a squeeze on the trigger and her head would be a smoking lump, trailing a thin wisp as the body collapsed. But he felt dread and conflict. *Why am I waiting?*

Polope turned and pointed to a model of an advanced drone video recorder. Her comments were now augmented by occasional hand gestures and inflections in

voice.

He felt something was off. *Her speech has a certain...lilt. I've heard it before.* Then a sickening thought hit his gut. Could *Rita* be disguised as the LEA? But their heights are different. Could they be relatives? Sisters? Does Ramshone keep the real LEA hidden, suspecting it has a mole or assassin?

Eyeing her again through the telescope as she turned back, he strained to recognize familiar features. *Too far to tell.* Sweat trickled from his armpits. His mind rushed over consequences of aborting. *Damned either way.* Baldermitz had to get word of at least an assassination attempt, or he would be the next target.

When he squeezed the trigger, a bolt of white energy zoomed past Polope and struck the model with an explosive force. As it scattered in flames, pandemonium broke out. Above, Jon scrambled back to his exit from the ceiling to the room off the hallway. Opening the door, he ran past the compromised hall monitor and synchronized his movements with others to remain unobserved. This took time he didn't have. His escape depended on being faster than Ramshone's security response. Emergency stairs would be quicker than elevators. Luckily, he had only two flights to the aerocab bay. As he approached the stairwell door, a large, rotund guard dressed in blue turned the corner, walking toward him. Jon slowed to a natural pace and nodded casually.

As they passed, the guard spoke, by his tone not a greeting.

Jon turned, smiled, not understanding Daumitzan. He reached for his ID badge when the guard's communicator earpiece issued a tone. The big man turned away for a moment, listened, moved his hand to his sidearm, and spun back around.

Two expertly placed hand blows to the head sent the large man bouncing against the wall. As he slid to the floor, Jon started to unfasten the guard's weapon, but heard approaching footsteps and instead raced down the stairs. Upon entering

the bay, there was only one aerocab. Once inside, he jammed his return trip card into the autodrive control. The cab had barely zoomed away when, behind it, blinking emergency lights came on as guards ran into the bay.

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In the sanctuary of his quarters, he took a deep breath and considered his limited options. Baldermitz would get word soon. What do they do to those who missed their target? Would they believe it was an error? He'd hoped so, but knew they'd most likely assume it was on purpose. Also the guard he laid out at Ramshone would certainly identify him. What ways did they have to track him? If Ramshone's security located him, they could kill an outlander without legal consequence. His meager consolation was the viewport screen that would show him anyone approaching his quarters.

His thoughts became a traffic jam. He needed to relax to get better perspective. There was wine in the kitchenette he didn't care for. But now, he poured a full glass and sat, trying to calm down. *Maybe Ramshone won't find me. Surely, Baldermitz didn't list this address in the phony records.* Rita's face came to mind. Jon wondered if she could vouch for him if he helped Ramshone find out who was behind this. But realizing the client's name was never mentioned blew this hope away. The thought of escape in the aerocab occurred, but he didn't know how to modify the trip card or what address to use. *I don't even know how to run.* There was a nudging in his mind, felt only on rare occasions. *The death wish. Maybe it's time.*

Effects of the wine and exhaustion finally combined and he drifted into an uneasy, troubled sleep.

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Half an hour later Jon was disturbed by three quick-succession tones. The viewport screen near the door flickered on, having detected motion outside. He

hopped up and peered at the screen. Men were coming up the stairs toward his quarters, two dressed in gray followed by another in black with a sidearm. The man in the lead was Gorot. *Baldermitz, they've heard.* Glancing around, he saw nothing that could be used as a weapon.

Clicking sounds in the front wall indicated they were electronically unlatching his door. Then...silence, nothing to see on the viewport screen. *What are they waiting for, an invitation?*

Sudden, loud bursts of sound came through the unopened door as streaks of bright light appeared on the viewport screen. Jon stumbled backward, realizing it was crossfire between two different groups.

After several minutes, the sounds subsided, and the screen showed only wisps of smoke and one body dressed in gray lying against a ramp rail. What would happen next depended on who would be coming through the door. There was eerie silence, then a click.

With a sudden rumble, the wall door slid into its recess and armed men dressed in dark brown stormed inside.

“Down, on your knees! Hands on your head,” the first commanded in English.

Four other men pointing weapons circled Jon. Laser-aim spots decorated his chest.

Their lead spoke into a communicator fastened to his helmet. “Subject located and unarmed.” Then he said to Jon, “You’re known as Jonas Rester, a suspected outlander associated with an assassination attempt at Ramshone Productions. Move and you give us reason to incinerate you.”

A minute later, someone else entered the room, and the men moved aside. With a stern look on her face, she approached Jon. “So here he is. I want to talk privately with this man. Move outside.”

The lead armed-man spoke Daumitzan, seeming to object.

“I’ve got this,” she said in English, pointing a hand weapon at Jon. “Out, I have questions bearing on proprietary issues.”

“Okay, we’ll be just outside. Let us know if there’s trouble,” the lead man said and motioned to his team.

Once the door closed, Polope Octon said, “Your shot missed me in the conference room on purpose.”

Jon expected a question, not a flat-out statement. “And how do you know?”

“We know a lot about you, Jon Greensburg. Jonas is an alias created for you. We have plenty of condemning evidence on the company that wants us out of business. The missing link is who they hired to eliminate our key execs. You are the link that led us to Baldermitz.”

“But isn’t the weapon fire between them and your security also a problem for you?”

“Those men in brown are not our security, they are the police. Baldermitz showed up when we tracked you here. To use one of your expressions, that’s the final nail in their coffin. Both Baldermitz and their client are going down. The police are now converging on them.”

“How did you know so much about me, other than the fake info?”

We had reason to do intensive research. Baldermitz Security has been under suspicion by police for some time. They use devious means to capture people from earth or other settlements with no concept of life in Daumitza. Only enough information is afforded the victims to remain in Baldermitz’s grips. A captive’s hope of return and release of loved ones is held hostage in exchange for illegal acts, including murder.”

“Like they tried on me?”

“Yes, and they kill captured victims who try to thwart them. Being

outlanders, there is no law to make this criminal.”

Jon moved his hands from his head. “Mind if I get off my knees?”

“Go ahead.” She laid her weapon on a table.

“So you see me more as the victim I am, rather than an assassin?”

“True, but we will need to keep you for a while, for evidence and an unofficial witness.”

“Can you arrange my return to Earth and get release of my parents and assets there?”

She hesitated. “Yes, but there may be other options on the first part.”

*Who is this woman, really?* “I want to hear, but my curiosity is burning over something else.”

“Such as?”

“If you suspected me as a pawn, forced to become an assassin, how could you dare appear in person in the conference room?”

“That was a high resolution holo-projection, fresh from our media department. My real location was elsewhere.”

“God, I could never get used to this place.”

Polope hesitated again. Then in a pleasant, liquid voice said, “I was hoping you might give it a try.”

Now he was certain. “Polope, you’re Rita”

She removed her five-inch heels and blonde wig, smiling. “My name really is Polope. With all this intrigue, I decided when being groomed for the LEA that I would never appear as I really am. So, every time I meet people, it’s the tall blonde. ‘Rita’ is a fictional name I used to get around in my company and find out what’s going on. She just happens to look like the real me.”

“I like her very much. And her daughter.”

Polope laughed. “You have skills I would like in the training of our security.

No assassination required. And we could teach you things to make life in Daumitza navigable.”

“Sounds like I’ve got a lot to consider.”

“Then consider this, ‘Rita’ and Ultina think you might even have other talents.”

Jon felt that melting sensation in his chest again. *There are many ways to be a victim. Some might not be so bad.*

“We’d better go out now,” she said, putting on the wig and stepping into her elevated heels. “I have things to explain about you to the guys outside, so don’t make sudden movements.”

“I promise,” Jon said, letting his mind run free. *Don’t know the culture here, but someday I might be promising more than professional service.*

When the door opened, he turned and gave a last look at his Daumitzan cage. *Mission complete.*

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